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RR RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR  
DE RUEHLG #0178/01 0531658  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 221658Z FEB 06  
FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2410  
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 LILONGWE 000178

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STATE FOR AF/S GABRIELLE MALLORY  
STATE FOR INR/AA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MUTHARIKA TAKES ON MALAWI'S REGIONAL POLITICS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Mutharika is attempting to reverse Malawi's longstanding tradition of regional politics by building the first political party with a truly national base. Regionalism has always been a major factor in Malawian politics, and shapes the prism through which modern political life must be seen. Dr. Hastings Banda's one party dictatorship struggled at times to maintain the veneer of regional balance. However since the advent of multi-party politics in 1994, regional alliances have taken center stage on the political scene. In order for President Mutharika's new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to succeed long-term, it must reverse the tide of regionalism, and transcend geographical associations. End Summary.

#### Regionalism: A Longstanding Tradition

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¶2. (U) Since before independence, regionalism has played an important role in Malawi. The reasons for regionalism include the absence of ideology in politics; the lack of a dominant tribe; and the growing confidence of second and third generation Malawians in the southern region. The negative effects of regionalism have had the greatest impact in the northern region, as it is the smallest of the three regions.

¶3. (U) Dr. Hastings Banda's one party dictatorship was able to mask regional inequality, as he gave senior appointments in his Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and in government to politicians from all three regions. However, this relative equality at higher levels was not duplicated with the general public. Thus, throughout Banda's rule there was a general feeling that the central region, which was his political base, was most favored by the regime.

#### Northerners and Southerners Need Not Apply

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¶4. (U) The anti-Banda sentiment in the north and south was a result of the regime's policy of systematic ethnic discrimination against Malawians of northern origin and, to a lesser extent, against those from selected groups in the southern region. For instance, the majority of political detainees were from the north and the south. Between the 1970s and early 1990s, the civil service, the university, several government departments and Parastatal organizations were purged of northerners.

¶5. (U) In 1989, a quota system was introduced in university selection to restrict the number of northerners attaining higher educational qualifications. Before 1989, the northern region, with just about 11 per

cent of the country's population, accounted for half of university entrants - largely due to the higher quality of schools established in the region by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries during the colonial era. With the quota system each district was guaranteed 10 places in the university, and should there be any spaces remaining, they were occupied according to population distribution. Given that the north had 5 sparsely populated districts, against 9 in the centre and the then 10 in the south, this led to a major reduction in the number of northerners making it to university.

#### Banda Repression Prompted Regional Split

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¶16. (U) As a result of these policies, many northerners and southerners were resentful of the Banda regime; thus they challenged the MCP dictatorship through the formation of the Alliance For Democracy (AFORD, dominated by northerners) and the United Democratic Front (UDF, dominated by southerners). In 1992-1993 AFORD and UDF successfully campaigned for the introduction of a multi-party political system.

¶17. (U) While the results of the 1993 referendum were a clear manifestation of the Malawian people's yearning for change, the voting pattern showed clearly that regionalism was an important factor in the results. Majorities in the northern region (88.4%) and southern region (83.5%) voted for the multi-party system while 65.5% of the central region voted to retain the autocratic one-party system. Clearly, the north and the south voted for change because they felt sidelined and the center voted against change, as they wanted to retain

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power and influence.

8.(SBU) Regional differences in voting patterns were again reflected in the presidential and parliamentary general elections in 1994 and 1999. Candidates for AFORD did very well in the north; those for MCP did well in the center and those for the UDF swept the southern region. The only exceptions were the far southern districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa, where the majority of the voters followed political heavy weight Gwanda Chakuamba to the MCP.

#### Reasons for Regionalism

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¶19. (U) Regionalism remains a factor in Malawian politics because of a number of reasons. The first important reason is the absence of ideology. In Malawian politics no political party operates on the left, right or center. The ideological vacuum is thus filled by regionalism.

¶10. (U) Secondly, since Malawi is ethnically very diverse there is no one dominant tribal group. Because of this ethnic diversity, it is difficult to base political mobilization on tribal identity. There is instead the need to construct a wider unit for mobilization. It is for this reason that the region, a geographical and administrative unit that puts together several districts and tribal groups, has become an important unit for competition for political and economic resources.

¶11. (U) Finally, many people in the southern region, including President Mutharika, are second or third generation Malawians. Their ancestors migrated into the country during the colonial period, fleeing vicious Portuguese rule in Mozambique, or coming to work as wage laborers and tenants on the settler plantations in the southern region. These immigrant tribal communities now constitute more than half of the southern region's population and probably a quarter or more of the country's overall population. They suffered an identity

crisis during the colonial and Banda-era periods. Their historical and cultural traditions were deliberately and politically subjugated, by the state, to those of the indigenous groups. With the opening up of the political system, they have begun to assert their "Malawian identity" and to flex their numerical power. Choosing political leaders from their own region is an important way of ensuring for themselves future political dominance in the country's most populous region. Thus Muluzi chose fellow southerner Mutharika as his successor.

#### Prospects for Change

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¶12. (U) In the 2004 elections regionalism was still a factor, however it was not as decisive as it had been in previous elections. In 2004 the MCP maintained (and even increased) its grip on the central region. However, the lack of intra-party democracy led to both AFORD and the UDF losing their political dominance over the northern and southern regions, respectively. Muluzi's imposition of parliamentary candidates led to many independents and other non-UDF candidates winning seats in Parliament that would normally go to the UDF. In AFORD, poor leadership led to the party winning a mere five seats, down from the 36 it had won in 1994. It appears that the party-region link in voter's minds was not as strong in 2004 as it had been in previous years. The individual candidate's profile seemed to be the voter's main concern in making a choice.

#### Comment: The First National Party?

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¶13. (SBU) For the first time in recent Malawian history, it now looks possible for a party, namely Mutharika's new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), to transcend regional association. With its sweep of all six seats in the December 2005 by-election (three in the north and three in the south), the DPP showed itself to be a serious player in Malawian politics. While it has successfully filled the vacuum created in the north by the demise of AFORD, the DPP also showed it could win in the previously UDF-dominated south. For the DPP to succeed beyond the next election cycle in 2009, it must maintain its national appeal, and stay away from association with a particular region.

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¶14. (SBU) For their part, the two major opposition parties must also try and develop a wider support base. The UDF has clearly lost its grip on the south, while the MCP is looking increasingly shaky in the central region. Neither party seems likely to carry parliamentary or presidential elections merely by campaigning in their traditional power base. However, as both parties are older than the DPP, it will be more difficult for them to lay claim to a wider popularity, as their records clearly show regional bias.

¶15. (SBU) Regardless, the recent voter focus away from the party-region link and towards a candidate's personal profile is an opportunity for all political parties to go national by recruiting and fielding attractive candidates across the country. This should improve the quality of representation in parliament, as more candidates are voted for on the basis of their qualifications, instead of their regional affiliation. The road to overcoming regionalism in politics is sure to be a long one, however the political spoils make it an enticing goal for each political party.

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